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Stalking Errol Flynn, the Spy Behind the Silver Screen

By Cynthia Gorney

The book was done, typed and packaged, and a seamy document it was—Errol Flynn raping women, Errol Flynn buying boys for the night, Errol Flynn stealing jewelry and dropping a piranha into his dinner hostess' fish tank and working so drunk he had to be wired to the castle battlements. Almost from the first interviews, Charles Higham had understood that he was writing about an essentially amoral man—"frozen in that fascist period of first puberty," he wrote in the Introduction, "when the human male feels his oats and is ready to try anything."

Higham had worked two full years on his Flynn biography. He had chosen a title, perused the photographs, sat through the minor motion pictures, stared over and over at the famous Flynn profile—the delicate mustache, the aquiline nose, the clean strong arc of the matinee idol's jawline in scenes from "Captain Blood" to "The Adventures of Robin Hood."

But something nagged.

It began with a single telephone call. Higham still needed some photographs of Flynn's early childhood, and he phoned for help to the Los Angeles writer who had ghosted Flynn's autobiography. The writer obliged.

Then the writer mentioned that an Errol Flynn buff had called him with an odd tip; perhaps Higham would be interested. It seemed this Flynn admirer had found an old newspaper article that said Dr. H. F. Erben, whom Higham knew only as an eccentric Austrian doctor who had befriended Flynn in New Guinea and remained a close companion for many years, had turned state's evidence at a 1946 Nazi espionage trial held in Shanghai.

Higham was curious, and a little uneasy. He got hold of the Shanghai trial transcript. Under oath, on the stand, the mysterious Dr. Erben had discussed in detail his role in the Mexico City branch of the Abwehr, the German military intelligence command that asked Erben to found the Shanghai Nazi spy ring. Erben, in a recent interview in Vienna for ABC news program "20/20," said he did testify as a prosecution witness in the Shanghai trial, but that he never said

under oath that he had spied for the Nazis.

Higham read the transcript quickly and decided to call Ladislav Farago. Farago is a popular writer, whose books include "The Game of the Foxes" and "Patton: Ordeal and Triumph"—and he knew an enormous amount about espionage, and kept voluminous files filled with names.

Higham reached Farago by telephone. Did he know anything about Nazis and Errol Flynn?

"Freddy McEvoy," Farago said. McEvoy, a green-eyed Australian playboy who looked very much like Flynn, was one of the central characters in Higham's book. There was a picture of him lounging on the deck of Flynn's yacht. Higham had thought of him as Flynn's closest friend. Now Farago told him that McEvoy was a rabidly anti-Semitic Nazi sympathizer—that some years before he drowned in a storm off the coast of Morocco, McEvoy had been part of a clandestine international clique working for the Third Reich.

Higham called London. He asked his British researcher to find Willi Frischauer, a retired journalist who lived in London and whom Higham considered one of the leading European authorities on espionage.

The researcher reached Frischauer at home. What Frischauer said, according to Higham, was this: He said the territory was quite dangerous. He said the researcher should come to his home the following morning to talk. He said, "There are people that won't like this found out. Be careful. Tell Mr. Higham to be careful."

He said, "I do know for a fact that Errol Flynn was a Nazi agent."

Charles Higham went to bed that evening and stared out into the darkness. He did not sleep. In the morning, operating, he says now, on the blind instinct of an experienced biographer, he took the train from Los Angeles to Washington, went straight to the National Archives, and found the files that contain the names of suspected "fifth column" subversives brought to the attention of the State Department during World War II.

He found Erben's name.

He found McEvoy's name.

"And I found cards," Higham says, "on Errol Flynn." "Possible Subversive Activities," read the cards.

Higham had spent the last 24 months of his life researching this biography, interviewing, traveling, telephoning, writing, rewriting, trapped in the strange symbiosis of the biographer and his subject. His advance was used up. The idea of another year's work made him feel physically ill. He had no idea how classified documents might be stored, how to explore them, how to declassify them.

He thought of dropping the whole book.

He thought of the vast array of appalling details he had already learned about the breathtaking Mr. Flynn—the violent sex, the kleptomania, the casual and boisterous cruelty. By the time he had finished the book, Higham believed himself considerably beyond surprises on the subject of Errol Flynn.

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The documents he requested began arriving in December 1978—fat Manila envelopes filled with State Department memoranda, passport applications, consular reports, FBI reports, Coast Guard reports, military intelligence reports. Higham read and interviewed, and pieced together what he could.

He says he got hold of Erben's Nazi membership card and certificate of Aryan ancestry. He says he learned from government documents that while Erben was working in Florida, at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp, he made photographs of training methods and camp layouts, and spoke openly of his Nazism. He says he learned that when a warrant was issued for Erben's arrest, on charges that Erben left the United States illegally during a citizenship revocation trial, Errol Flynn hid Erben aboard his yacht and helped get the German doctor into Mexico.

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In his interview for "20/20," Erben acknowledged, speaking English, that he had joined the Nazi party, but "not to join as an active political member." Nazi membership was necessary for his continued status as an academic, he said. To the charge that he involved Flynn in Nazi spying activities, Erben replied, "Utterly impossible . . . neither snaring Errol Flynn, a friend of mine, not brain-washing Errol Flynn, a friend of mine, was ever attempted or ever considered."

A dim memory surfaced now, something the late producer Robert Lord had told Higham nearly 10 years before. It had to do with Lord's picture "Dive Bomber," filmed in Hawaii in 1941. Lord had been adamant that Higham not tape-record or write down his statement, but as Higham dug back he believed he could reconstruct almost verbatim what the producer had told him.

In his book, he writes that this is what he heard:

Lord: "I do not want this statement published until after I'm dead. In our advance prints of the picture, before it was released, we used most of Errol's land and air shots of Pearl Harbor at his suggestion in a special, semi-documentary presentation of

America's power in the Pacific. An advance print was sent to our representatives in Japan in the normal course of events in the late summer of 1941 . . ." Higham says Lord was in naval intelligence, and felt the Japanese had studied those films as a planning aid before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Lord: "It's also shocking to think in retrospect that again at Errol's suggestion, we showed every detail of the San Diego Naval Base and the entire structure of the Enterprise. I believe the Japanese kept the film under study for years in case of a possible assault on California."

Higham had to find Erben.

"Obviously, if he was still alive, he was my number one target," Higham says. "I had a burning, consuming desire to expose this man . . . I hate Nazis with all my soul. Writing this book for me had been an adventure the first time round. It was a mission the second time round. A mission of exposure of my enemy."

Higham had one of his researchers check for Erben's name in past American Medical Association directories. He found it. Erben was listed as an absentee member in Vienna.

"So I called Vienna," Higham says. "No reply. I called again. No reply. So I had my service calling day and night, for three weeks, all through the night, with instructions to call me no matter when, if they got through. Nothing happened. One morning at 9:00 I got out of bed, and I had an overpowering impulse to call Vienna—and I did. And a woman answered. My heart almost stopped."

The woman, speaking English, told Higham she was Erben's sister. Erben was out of the country, Higham says she said. He had moved to a leper colony in Sagada, in the Philippines, a wild and isolated place in the mountains where the doctor was at work on field research in leprosy.

There was no way Higham could reach the place himself, he decided—the terrain was treacherous, and prone to violent storms. He asked the Philippine consulate to suggest reliable journalists who might make the trip for him, with a tape recorder and a set of questions, and when Higham had his names he stuck a pin into the list at random to make his selection.

The man he had chosen, Higham says, had grown up in Sagada.

And he knew Erben. He knew him very well.

The Philippine reporter talked to Erben at some length, Higham says, asking questions that made no reference to espionage. It helped to have a third party, Higham thought; he had learned from a former intelligence officer that in a situation like this, the interviewer ought to look as innocent as possible.

"He taught me counterintelligence techniques," Higham says. "He taught me, for instance, that you never disclose to your subject what you know—that by seeming to be ignorant, you find out more than they intended you to know. Because the one thing that's significant of all Nazi agents is their contempt, especially for the English. And he would have a double contempt for me, because he would see me as a lightweight, showbiz writer who was lucky enough to find him in the wilds of the Philippines."

There was a great deal Higham needed to know about Erben, but one of the most important points of all was Erben's apparently illegal flight to Mexico during the trial to revoke his citizenship. If Higham could prove that Flynn helped him go, he believed it would help establish beyond a doubt that actor and German Nazi together, knowingly, conspired against the Allies.

So the Philippine reporter innocently asked Erben when he had last seen Errol Flynn.

"The answer was exactly what I'd hoped for—'When Errol Flynn drove me into Mexico, in November 1940,'" Higham says. "That was it. It was fabulous. It was on tape."

When an FBI agent was recently asked by a reporter about the Nazi spying allegations, the agent asked plaintively, "Next you're going to tell me that John Wayne was a KGB agent?"

Higham believes that if FBI men had had their wits about them during World War II, Flynn would have been arrested as a Nazi subversive. "The FBI was not an intelligence organization, and their agents were not trained in intelligence techniques," he writes in his book. "They failed to coordinate their investigations with those of the State Department, and even when they tried, they often found their complaints blocked. They also failed to correlate with military and naval intelligence . . . Had British intelligence been in charge of the Flynn matter, there is no question they would have succeeded in arresting him."

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